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Following Up on the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) Report

**{Submissions to Ministry of Environment and Forests, Gol, may
incorporate following action points}**

1. Background:

The Ministry of Environment and Forests, Gol has uploaded the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) Report, submitted on 30th August 2011 on its website on 23rd May 2012 following orders from Central Information Commissioner and Delhi High Court. The Ministry has asked for public feedback within a period of 45 days i.e. on or before the 5th July 2012.

Current practice: *Development by imposition* by subverting democratic processes through collusion of politicians, officials and moneyed interests; coupled to *conservation, also by imposition* by subverting democratic processes.

Two striking instances of these practices from Western Ghats: Much of the mining such as at Kalne in Sindhurg district is development by imposition, and the Western Ghats UNESCO World Heritage proposal on Western Ghats, turned down because of opposition, not only from U N Forum on Indigenous People, but also International Union for Conservation of Nature for exclusion of local communities while preparing the proposal, is conservation by imposition.

Now the WGEEP proposals are being wrongly portrayed as "***Conservation by Imposition***" as if the Panel has prescribed rigid boundaries for Western Ghats, for Ecologically Sensitive Zones 1, 2 and 3 and given a set of inflexible restrictive prescriptions to be followed for various development initiatives in these zones.

Quite to the contrary, WGEEP has clearly stated that what is proposed are only provisional boundaries and provisional guidelines, both to serve as a basis of an informed deliberations through an inclusive process reaching down to all Gram Sabhas/ Ward Sabhas throughout the Western Ghats region. The report suggests that an excellent precedent exists whereby the Goa Government placed the database prepared by Goa Regional Plan 2021 before all Gram Sabhas for correction of any errors as well as suggestions. Additionally, the report does not only talk of regulation, it suggests promotional measures such as payments to farmers for sequestering carbon in the soil, or protection to sacred groves or pools or to wild life.

2. Reaching out to people

An important action point that emerges from this approach is – **dissemination** of the information and understanding pooled together in the report through the medium of various regional languages and asking for feedback from the Gram Sabhas / Ward Sabhas as a first step in a down-up planning process. Such a process was successfully implemented in developing the Regional Plan 2021 for Goa; it can widely followed.

The state governments should also follow up on this by taking appropriate action to implement **devolution of powers to local bodies** as required by 73rd and 74th Amendments to Constitution, and ensure that all levels of Government are properly involved in implementing such of the proposals of WGEEP report as are found to be acceptable through a broad based democratic decision making process.

Moreover, there are other proposals in the WGEEP report that should find acceptance all over the country, within and outside the bounds of Western Ghats, and regardless of any designation such as Ecologically Sensitive Zones^{1, 2 and 3}.

3. Remedying Deficit in Environmental Governance

The Governments should initiate a series of steps to remove **deficit in environmental governance** as pointed out in the WGEEP report:

Strictly enforce environmental laws such as Air and Water Acts to control pollution

Facilitate, not suppress freedom of assembly of people drawing attention to unacceptable levels of environmental degradation

Give teeth to local bodies, i.e. Gram, Taluk and Zilla Panchayats and Nagarpalikas and Mahanagarpalikas to make decisions on environmental issues

Put in place Biodiversity Management Committees in all local bodies, fully empowered under the Biological Diversity Act, 2002, to regulate use of local biodiversity resources, and to charge Collection Fees

Initiate registration of crop cultivars as called for by Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers' Rights Act, 2001, and give grants to Panchayats to build capacity for *in situ* conservation of crop genetic resources

Implement fully the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest-dwellers (Rights over the Forest) Act, 2006

Reinstate the system of empowering citizens to monitor status of environment under the Paryavaran Vahini scheme

Carry out a radical reform of Environmental Clearance process through [a] assigning preparation of EIA statements to a neutral competent body that does not depend on payment by project proponents, [b] making mandatory the involvement of local

Biodiversity Management Committees in the process of EIA preparation, [c] making mandatory taking on board all information submitted and suggestions made during Public Hearings, [d] making mandatory periodic environmental clearance requirement, preferably every five years, [e] making mandatory involvement of local Biodiversity Management Committees in the process of monitoring of implementation of conditions laid down while granting Environmental Clearances, [f] make mandatory preparation of regional Cumulative Environmental Impact Analyses

Enhance the scope of Regional Development Plans to include key environmental concerns and make mandatory involvement of local Biodiversity Management Committees in the process of preparation of Regional Plans

4. Creating a sound information base on Indian Environment

The Governments should initiate a series of steps to build a transparent, participatory database on Indian environment:

Promote full access to all pertinent information, for instance, through freely making the currently suppressed Zonal Atlas for Siting of Industries (ZASI) available.

Take action on organizing an Indian Biodiversity Information System (IBIS) in line with the proposals before the National Biodiversity Authority since 2006.

Organize a public transparent, participatory database on Indian environment by drawing on student Environmental Education projects as recommended by Curriculum Framework Review, 2005 of the National Council for Educational Research and Training.

5. Reactions in form of a letter, fax or email may be sent to:

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More details about the WGEEP Report are available at the following link.

<http://wp.me/pzBjo-Lg>

